5
DESCRIPTIONS

5.0 DESCRIPTIONS

Descriptions, comparisons (chap. 6), and motion (chap. 7) constitute the three basic dimensions of all professional and technical communication. A good description of a description is a *word picture of an entity*. That entity could have mass (solid, liquid, or gas), or it could be an intangible (a condition, an idea, or a concept). It should not be drowned in words. Without nonverbal material or graphics, a properly worded description should create in the receiver's mind an identical image of the entity envisioned by the sender. Do not let the magic of today's sophisticated technology mislead you. There will be times when none of it is available and you must communicate an accurate description. You *can* do it solely with words. It is not the quantity of information you put into a description, it is the choice of nonambiguous, relevant, key facts you *do* include that make a useful description.

Everyone knows the old chestnut about the group of blind men, none of whom had ever encountered an elephant. One ran into a leg and thought the beast was like a tree. In turn, one grabbed the trunk, concluding it to be like a snake; another grabbed its tail, imagining it to resemble a bell rope; another was poked by the tusk and believed it to be like a sword scabbard; and so on.

Only when they all got together and shared views were they able to build a composite mental picture of an elephant. You have to view the whole subject from all angles, with perspicacity, so no aspect is overlooked, ignored, or overdone. And you all have to speak the same idiom.

Copyright 2009. Momentum Press.
All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Community College Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 3/19/2024 3:34 PM via AIKEN TECHNICAL COLLEGE
AN: 501153 ; Morris, M. D..; Professional Expression : To Organize, Write, and Manage for Technical Communication
Account: s8489886.main.ehost

5.1

A well-written external description of a process tube by Gordon Noyes with the Norton Company, Worcester, MA, is

> Process Tube, 5½", used as gas-flow kiln furniture by the semiconductor industry in the preparation of silicon discs for printed circuitry. The tube alone weighs 42 pounds. It consists of silicon carbide, and is slate gray with small, mica-like shiny spots covering the entire surface.
>
> The first segment has a 6" outside diameter, an inside diameter of 5½", and is 87" long. Fixed axially to one end, segment two is a 4" long, cone-shaped cap that tapers to an opening 1½" outside diameter by 1" inside diameter. Segment three, extending axially from this, is a 6" long tube, 1½" outside diameter by 1" inside diameter. The fourth segment is a 2½" outside diameter ball-joint that opens forward into a 1" inside diameter hole. The last three-piece assembly looks like an elongated nipple.

Can you get a clear mental picture of a process tube from Noyes's word picture? Try to sketch it yourself now, then turn to appendix 5.1 to see how close you came. Don't peek. J. T. Tocci of Letterkennny Army Depot read and envisioned the text, then produced the realistic sketch you see in appendix 5.1.

5.2

Although description writing fundamentals (sec. 5.7) must be observed, descriptions of tangibles may vary depending upon the writer's viewing position. But descriptions of the insides of a subject (a tank, a chamber, a space capsule) become easier because your point of view is locked into your surroundings—a Jonah-and-the-whale-type relationship. Ted Siegal of the Corps of Engineers, Baltimore, Maryland, was assigned to draw the interior and existing conditions of Room G-26A in the George Fallon Federal Office Building, with the objective of planning its reconfiguration. In an emergency, this written description was transmitted hastily to an architectural office where a draftsman easily transliterated Siegal's word picture into a working drawing. Try to sketch your interpretation of this memo, then check it against the office drawing that appears in appendix 5.2.

> Room G-26A, George Fallon Federal Bldg., Baltimore, MD. Rectangular, 30' E-W × 40' N-S × 9' high, with 4' N-S × 15' E-W offset projecting into southeast corner. No windows.

EBSCOhost - printed on 3/19/2024 3:34 PM via AIKEN TECHNICAL COLLEGE. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Reinforced concrete framing with columns at NE and SW corners projecting inward 6" N-S and 1" E-W. Columns are also on E and W walls 12' from S wall. W wall column is 2' wide, projecting 6" inward. E wall column is 4' wide and projects 1' inward. W wall is concrete block, plastered. N wall is full-height factory-finished metal panels. S wall and SE corner offsets are full-height factory-finished metal panels. S wall portion is acoustical rated vinyl accordion pleated partition. One 3' × 7' solid core hollow metal door, centered on the 15' face of the SE corner offset, opens to vestibule off outside corridor. A second door (same size and type) on S wall, 13' from the W wall, opens to storeroom. Both doors swing inward to G-26A. The corridor door is hinged on right when viewed from the room, and the storeroom door is hinged on the left.

Floor is reinforced concrete, carpeted wall-to-wall with synthetic fiber gold-tone carpeting over foam rubber under-padding.

Ceiling is suspended acoustic tile with recessed lighting fixtures. Hung framing is exposed "tees." Tiles are 4' N-S × 2' E-W. Light fixtures, 9" wide E-W × 3' long N-S, are 4' o.c. in alternate N-S rows of ceiling tiles, except along room center-line. Each fixture has three standard fluorescent tube units. Light switches on N wall up 4' 6", 3' from W wall and just E of corridor exit. Two electrical outlets on the W wall 10" above the floor, 4' and 20' from N wall.

Air conditioning vents surround each light fixture. 14" diameter return air inlets in ceiling on the N-S center line 13' and 26' from the N wall.

A 16' long × 5' high chalkboard is center mounted on the N wall; and another (same size) is center mounted at a point on the W wall 10' from the N wall. Bottom of chalkboard is 3' off floor. Pull-down projector screens are in 10' long housings centered over each chalkboard.

Note his word economy. "No windows," instead of perhaps, "There are no windows in the room," or variations, all overwritten. He is specific about door swing directions; tying left and right by stating, "When viewed from the room." Since he orients the room in the first paragraph, he could have written directions instead.

EBSCOhost - printed on 3/19/2024 3:34 PM via AIKEN TECHNICAL COLLEGE. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

5.3 STYLE

Technical writing need not be dull, nor should it be so truncated it needs a guide. Until now I have advocated the precise, clipped style in description writing for short reports, memoranda, letters, and attachments. In writing for magazine articles, books, and news releases, present your facts in a reader-friendly but professional style. That is not a license to wax flowery, just open your wording carefully. Do not digress onto tangents. Keep your paper always moving toward your objective (see sec. 14.4).

In a long report about "Dredging in the Contaminated James River Channel," Richard L. Klein of the Corps of Engineers, Norfolk District, describes his subject and its surroundings in unmistakable, direct terms that are easily comprehensible and tightly stated. He is completely professional, yet he delivers his technical message as mellifluously as any good novelist.

> Dredging in the Contaminated James River Channel. The James River is a major tributary to the Chesapeake Bay. From headwaters in the Allegheny Mountains to rapids at Richmond, the James is a free-flowing stream crossing central Virginia. Below Richmond the river is tidal and navigable to its mouth. From Richmond to Hopewell, steep bluffs rise at the banks to the numerous industrial plants confining a narrow, winding channel. Below Hopewell the river grows wider, and the bends less severe. This lower leg of the James flows past colonial plantations, farms, historic settlements, and through the region's greatest seed oyster grounds. Finally it widens to several miles where it joins the deepwater ports at Hampton Roads.
>
> Congress authorized the James River Channel by passing the 1930 River and Harbor Act. We maintain minimum dimensions: 25 feet deep by 300 feet wide from the mouth to Hopewell; 25 feet by 200 feet to Richmond Harbor, the head of navigation.
>
> The channel serves the ports of Richmond and Hopewell and industrial uses such as DuPont and Allied Chemical. A variety of ocean-going and coastal vessels carry raw materials or finished goods to and from those facilities. Transportation savings and vessel safety are the primary benefits we gain from the channel.
>
> Sediments carried by the James River waters tend to settle in the channel at several places, forming shoals that obstruct navigation. Over the years, the Corps of Engineers has observed a pattern, thus were able to identify and name the shoals, then plan for their periodic removal by dredging.

EBSCOhost - printed on 3/19/2024 3:34 PM via AIKEN TECHNICAL COLLEGE. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

As in many waterways, maintenance of the James River Channel was well suited to the cutter suction dredge. Above Hopewell, where the river is narrow, the dredged material was pumped economically into upland disposal sites. In the wide reaches below Hopewell, it was more economical to deposit the material into open water outside the channel. Engineers used their many years of dredging experience to choose the disposal sites that caused minimal channel resedimentation. At some places the disposed material built up, creating islands; at others it tended to disperse without reentering the channel. Today the conventional and most economical dredging method in the James River is still the cutter suction dredge.

5.4 RECEIVER LEVELS

Recall an earlier discussion (sec. 1.5.5) about writing to accommodate your reader's levels, *both* technical and comprehension. In a memorandum about a newly developed torque wrench, you would couch specific design details in different words to a shop mechanic from those for a professional engineer. Both men have significant roles in the wrench's production, but at different levels because of their training. Yet both must receive the same vital information. The answer is in your choice of words, and in sentence structure. Refer to basics in chapter 1.

To illustrate this idea, I asked Dr. Allyn B. Ley, a professor at Cornell University's School of Medicine in New York, how he describes shock to his first-year medical students. Then I asked Barbara L. Smith, RN, an industrial nurse at The Norton Co.'s Worcester, MA, plant how she would explain shock to a worker whose buddy had just come around from one. Both medical professionals defined the condition accurately, both accomplished a successful message, yet the wording of each was completely different.

To first-year medical students: Shock is a clinical condition characterized by signs and symptoms that arise when the cardiac output is insufficient to fill the arterial tree with blood under sufficient pressure to provide organs and tissues with adequate blood flow. The low-flow state in vital organs is the common denominator in all forms of shock. It may arise from reduction in total body blood volume; that, caused by dilatation of the vascular bed from neurogenic causes, or from inadequacy of the pump function of the heart.

EBSCOhost - printed on 3/19/2024 3:34 PM via AIKEN TECHNICAL COLLEGE. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

To manufacturing plant personnel: Shock is a systematic depression due to the lack of blood supply to the brain. It is a significant enough jolt to the body to change physical functions and appearance. Shock, caused by injury, can be identified quickly. The victim is weak and limp, the skin is pale, and the lips may be bluish. Breathing may be shallow and the pulse beats (easily felt at the side of the neck) are rapid and sometimes irregular. If loss of blood has occurred, you may observe restlessness, thirst, and anxiety. In the late stages of shock, the victim may be unresponsive, and both eye pupils may be widely dilated.

5.5

Describing *an idea, a notion, or a concept* is different from describing a physical entity. There is nothing you can see, hear, smell, touch, or taste. Ideas exist solely in the sender's mind, thus the job here is to get your receiver to comprehend your point of view, your thought, and its benefits. It is not easy to get a receiver to wrap his mind around a creation of your mind without a clear description. Too many bright people become mired in unorganized messages and fall to badgering a receiver with repetitions of "Did you get that?" or "See what I'm saying?" Not necessary.

Here is the easiest, most direct way. Think through your entire notion, and understand it all yourself. Then write a first rough draft. Rework that draft several times to boil out the nonessentials and deadheads. Be sure your basic premise is obvious, and that you have omitted the minutiae.

A local newspaper phoned Westinghouse Canada, Inc., Hamilton, Ontario, seeking a description of a contract item. T. Nanba was especially adroit in composing this descriptive reply, especially since English is his second language. He followed the suggested easy way.

Third party maintenance services are those purchased by an organization other than the manufacturer/vendor, for the purchaser/end-user.

Installation and maintenance services are important considerations in the successful marketing of telecommunication equipment, particularly in the field of airline reservation networks. Local sites can be serviced from our plant, however, cost and response factors limit our ability to serve distant, widely scattered American cities. There exist several independent firms who can, with training, provide such services as a "third party" to our clients. We may hire

EBSCOhost - printed on 3/19/2024 3:34 PM via AIKEN TECHNICAL COLLEGE. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

them on a "demand" basis, wherein they will charge at a relatively high hourly rate, but only for services performed, or on a "contract" basis, wherein they will maintain equipment at a fixed monthly fee.

5.6 GRAPHICS

"One picture is worth more than ten thousand words," allegedly is a Chinese proverb according to Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations*: I don't believe so. There is nothing in the Chinese literature that corroborates that notion. At least nothing attributable.

Including Mandarin, Cantonese, and local dialects, all Chinese is written in the Han alphabet. Unlike the phonetic alphabets of the Western world, the Han is a pictorial alphabet. Therein, each character was designed as a miniature brush-line-drawing, symbolically representing the word (or part) it means to convey. Add-ons to a basic character will alter its sense of meaning or sound. A single character can mean several different things, depending upon the context of the rest of the sentence surrounding it. Conversely, in some cases there is more than one word that you can use to express a single thought, especially if the new character appears more aesthetic within its surroundings.

For instance, the phonetic sound "Dan," a male name in several world cultures, is written 旦. That symbol, depicting the sun above the horizon, could mean the hour of dawn (daybreak); or egg; or bright boy (all ostensibly from the same root idea of a beginning). Any one of those meanings depends upon the flow of the rest of the words in the writer's thought. That symbol cannot be misconstrued for the sun headed down toward the horizon (sunset) because the horizon line symbol would be drawn above the sun; there is no such picture-word.

In his late third-century AD classic tome, *Wen Fu* (*The Art of Letters*), Lu Chi (Ji) wrote, "The character you choose within any sentence should meet (or approach) these three criteria; it should have: the correct sense of meaning; appear on the page as the most pleasing to the eye; and, cause the most pleasing sound when read aloud." It must have been difficult to have been a successful author there, then. Perhaps that's why so much from that good era still exists.

It seems hardly possible that that advice could be a Chinese proverb because of the nature of Han words. It would be redundant and un-Chinese to write, "One picture is worth more than ten thousand pictures."

EBSCOhost - printed on 3/19/2024 3:34 PM via AIKEN TECHNICAL COLLEGE. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

I. S. Turgenev, in 1862, penned *Fathers and Sons*, in which he takes a broader and more nebulous view with his derivative line, "A picture shows me at a glance what it takes dozens of pages of a book to expound" (chap. 8). Perhaps some writers in old Russia didn't do all that well at deadhead deletion.

Use photographs, schematics, sketches, charts, tables, graphs, etc., liberally to augment, not to replace (in addition to, not instead of), the written word. Always draft your composed description, then refer to the related graphic if there is one. In every graphic caption, include the related text-index number. This allows you (if layout space demands) freedom to put a graphic on a different page from its related text. In a narrative description, never write a statement like, "Arrange switches on control panel as shown in photo 6.53." Describe the switch arrangement completely in the text, then refer to the photo.

5.7 CAPTIONS

A caption should make the graphic more explicit. Some captions are so complete that you can envision the graphic without actually seeing it.

Shelter, canvas, to cover aircraft maintenance one-man work area; lightweight, portable; assembles quickly.

That tells you what it is, its purpose, its materials, and its advantage.

Daylight aerial photo of crash site, 4.7. Shows direction, skid tracks, and vehicle wreckage, plus position on sharp curve and wreckage of stalled tractor at impact point. Also shows total absence of warning signs or lights.

That caption calls attention to important elements and their related positions in a broad area photo.

Jefferson University 1922 freshman class, picture 6.3. Future president, Thor Brockway, is in third row, fourth from left.

It pinpoints focus subject in a large, identified group.

New model, miniature GPA dash-mounted device, 3.25. U.S. penny included to show relative scale.

Caption gives all necessary information to augment the text.

5.8 DESCRIPTION WRITING METHOD

Use as many of these that apply, not necessarily all of them.

5.8.1

Name the entity. First tell your reader what your focus subject is.

EBSCOhost - printed on 3/19/2024 3:34 PM via AIKEN TECHNICAL COLLEGE. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

5.8.2

Tell what it does, or its uses.

5.8.3

Provide general characteristics: shape and condition.

5.8.4

Provide physical characteristics: length, width, height, name and number of principal parts, and special features.

5.8.5

Provide special characteristics: material, color, finish, and electrical or mechanical specifications.

5.8.6

Provide additional identifying information as needed: catalog listing with stock number, developer's name, and trade term (e.g., Geiger counter, Surge milker, Norden bombsight, Benkleman beam).

5.9 DELIVERY

Write a narrative, not a list of facts.

5.9.1

The government way may appear clumsy, but it is the most explicit, for example, "1 ea. Desk, wood, brown" is preferable to "1 ea. Brown wooden desk." The subject is not a *brown*, it is a *desk*.

5.9.2

Use *factual* exposition. Impressions are opinions; do not offer opinions in descriptions unless requested in the charge. Be precise.

5.9.3

Avoid qualifiers; they weaken the statements. For example, "It is pretty light" is nebulous, "It is light" is precise. Same goes for "very."

YOUR WORD PICTURE MUST CREATE A
REALISTIC IMAGE IN YOUR RECEIVER'S MIND.

—A.L. Morris

EBSCOhost - printed on 3/19/2024 3:34 PM via AIKEN TECHNICAL COLLEGE. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

EBSCOhost - printed on 3/19/2024 3:34 PM via AIKEN TECHNICAL COLLEGE. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use